

## Toward Higher Consciousness Theory and Research

**William Halal**  
**George Washington University**  
**USA**

This seminal article by Michael Towsey is must reading for any scholar who cares about limits to the physical paradigm in science.

Towsey does a masterful job of pulling together the contrary evidence that has been gathering for decades to challenge the belief that information in the brain alone can explain consciousness. These "anomalies" include the missing 95 percent of all matter and energy thought to be "dark" stuff that pervades the universe; the indeterminate nature of atomic behavior at the quantum level; our inability to explain the origins of life; the sense of purpose and other inner qualities of the mind; and even evidence suggesting that extrasensory perception and homeopathy are real.

He quibbles a bit in calling some of these anomalies "legitimate" issues that could be answered within the materialist paradigm, while others are "illegitimate" because they threaten the paradigm. These are fine distinctions, and the result is a compelling indictment of the belief that only physical phenomena matter. (no pun intended)

The article then proposes an alternative paradigm of "organicism" in which the relationships among physical objects gives rise to higher-order behavior that transcends the physical. Thus, biology is not reducible to physics, for instance, because organic life exhibits metaphysical properties of the mind – purpose, meaning, etc.. Towsey does a fine job of carrying this logic further to lay out epistemological maps of knowledge organized about consciousness.

These are brilliant contributions, but I think Towsey is too modest in his goals. Organicism sounds too much like general systems theory, so what is really new? Organicism and the article in general fail to recognize that something is at play here besides "relationships among components of a system." Towsey recognizes consciousness and metaphysical issues, but contends they are merely "matters of degree" from the physical world. He seems to imply that organicism is, in effect, really about "life," but doesn't say so because of all the messy problems that entails. This "anomaly" in the concept of organicism hints at a missing "higher-order factor" of some kind that is central to the puzzle of consciousness, as I'll outline in a minute.

This issue of higher-order intelligence is usually avoided, however, because it raises the long standing scientific specter of "ghosts in the machine." Towsey gives a nod to some theories in this direction, such as the morphogenetic fields of Rupert Sheldrake. Later the paper goes into detail on Sarkar's theory of microvitae as a kind of metaphysical string theory explaining consciousness as infinitely tiny packets of some higher energy that make up conscious thought and matter itself.

I suggest that Towsey's path breaking work needs to be extended by aggregating all such theories, examples, and evidence of higher consciousness to get a sense of what really is involved. Here's a quick list that bears on this need:<sup>1</sup>

- A respected group of psychologists and other scholars has come to conclude that *consciousness "emerges" from life* to form a higher-order state of mind.
- Hundreds of medical studies show that *people with positive outlooks, social ties, and self-worth tend to be healthier and live longer.*
- The well-established "placebo" effect (and its opposite, the nacebo effect) demonstrate that *beliefs can be so strong that medical trials must control for them.*
- Religious people tend to be healthier and suffer less depression. A researcher at the US National Institutes of Health said, *"The weight of evidence overwhelmingly confirms that spiritual life influences health."*
- *"Technologies of Consciousness"* are being defined as methods that shape awareness, choices and the general state of mind. Examples include Artificial Intelligence, Neurotech, BioFeedback, Drugs, and Virtual Reality.
- Parapsychology studies show strong effects, but bias prevents acceptance in scientific circles. *A meta-analysis showed belief is crucial to the results.*

There is much more evidence supporting the effects of higher consciousness, and it makes a compelling case that something significant is at work beyond the physical world, although we are largely ignorant of what it is and how it works. But people don't usually think about evidence supporting metaphysical phenomena because science has declared it off limits, and religious people think it is ineffable.

The taboo against metaphysical claims is so great that even iconoclasts like Towsey seem to have a difficult time seeing that the vast realm of higher-order behavior constantly manifest all about us – beliefs, ideologies, choices, religious experiences, emotions, visions, and other subjective mental states – collectively comprise higher consciousness. Our challenge is to explore this inner world as a great new frontier, a frontier of the mind. With enormous challenges like the threat of climate change facing the globe over the next crucial decade or so, I think humans will have to harness this inner world of consciousness to survive.<sup>2</sup>

An article by John Sagi recently reviewed theories of consciousness and integrated them into a coherent framework.<sup>3</sup> What stands out is a consensus that higher consciousness seems to flow from perceptions, to memory, emotion, will and choice, purpose, culture, values and beliefs, imagination, transcendent experiences, visions, and finally spirit. It's not a rigorous analysis, but I think it begins to lay out the basic structure of consciousness. It suggests that consciousness starts as the body senses and reacts to the world, and then generates higher-order thoughts, culminating in various transcendent states. The concept of "spirit" appears to be central in this model because consciousness seems to be directed and energized by unknown spiritual forces. This is not to imply supernatural beings but simply that prosaic sense of awareness each individual carries through life – "human spirit." It's just a rough model, but it raises the possibility that the universe is permeated with a vast realm of spiritual energy that connects humans, and possibly all life.

After all, societies throughout history have always been organized around various beliefs in spirit. Catholicism calls it "grace," early philosophers defined it as "elan vitale," and Taoists think of it as "chi." The humanities – the other half of scholarship that C.P. Snow saw as apart from the world of science – is filled with stories of crisis, tragedy, love, betrayal, triumph, mystery, and other realities of human spirit. Could this wealth of knowledge acquired throughout history be a mere fantasy, or does it reflect a great truth that has been lost to science?

We don't have the answers yet, and we could be surprised in time to learn that the physicists were right. Even today, many believe neuroscience will show that the human mind is reducible to the brain, allowing advanced computers and artificial intelligence to replace humans.<sup>4</sup>

The best way to address these doubts is to start treating consciousness like a real field of inquiry. To develop theories, conduct experiments, and see if evidence supports or refutes the theories – just as in any other field of science. It's not going to be easy understanding a mysterious phenomenon as higher consciousness. But the same was said of evolution, nuclear energy, the DNA of life, knowledge, and almost all great advances. We'll never know until we get to work on these tough issues.

## Correspondence

William Halal  
Professor Emeritus, George Washington University  
President, TechCast LLC [www.TechCast.org](http://www.TechCast.org)  
Email: [halal@gwu.edu](mailto:halal@gwu.edu)

## Notes

1. These examples are taken from Ch. 9 in *Technology's Promise* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and [www.TechCast.org](http://www.TechCast.org)
2. Marien & Halal, Understanding the global MegaCrisis, *The Futurist* (June 2011)
3. [www.TechCast.org/FeaturedArticles](http://www.TechCast.org/FeaturedArticles)
4. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (NY: Penguin, 2006)

